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ABSTRACT

A review of the status of English language instruction in Czechoslovakia begins with an overview of the role of English in the society in general and outlines the status of English use and instruction in the educational system at all levels. The review also covers the characteristics and training of English language instructors, the type and availability of instructional materials, educational administration and planning in relation to English teaching, British and other international support, commercial opportunities related to English instruction, creative writing, language research, and other sources of information. It is concluded that English is increasingly the language for scientific and other international meetings, and that it enjoys wide popularity among young people. Although not compulsory in the secondary school system, English is an option that has overtaken French and German. It is the most popular language studied in higher education. (MSE)

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ENGLISH TEACHING PROFILE

Country: Czechoslovakia

Date: February 1986

1. ROLE AND STATUS OF ENGLISH

Reflecting its status as the major language of international communication, English is held in high regard. The authorities recognize the importance of English as a vital tool for science, technology and business. Students are usually encouraged to learn English rather than German. English is increasingly the official language for scientific and other international meetings even where there are few western participants. As the language of international pop culture, English enjoys wide popularity among the young and the (fortunately rare) graffiti are almost invariably in English. Only a tiny minority of officially-sponsored scientists, academics, artists and government servants regularly visit English-speaking countries. Nonetheless, many Czechs with few if any contacts with native speakers and who have never visited an English-speaking country, still manage to read English easily and speak it reasonably well. However, because of national tradition, the flood of German-speaking tourists, and Austrian and German (West and East) television, most Czechs, especially those over the age of forty, are far more at home with German.

Though not compulsory in the secondary school system, English as an option has overtaken German and eclipsed French. It is by far the most popular foreign language studied in further education; at one language school in Prague over 6,500 students take English classes. With the exception of The Morning Star, and occasionally The Financial Times at luxury hotels, English newspapers and periodicals are not on sale. Almost the only British books on sale are a very poor selection of scientific and technical works at about four times their UK price. Russian editions of the classics are cheap but not widely available.

According to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the Czechs are the world's greatest library users.

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Few municipal libraries have British books and none has a proper English language collection. However, both the Czech State Library and the University (= Slovak State) Library in Bratislava have substantial collections of British books presented by the Council. The English section of the Czech State Library is open to the general public and is, effectively, a small British Council library within the state system.

Universities and scientific institutions have pathetically inadequate funds for Western books. A leading university English department for example, was allowed to buy only six titles a year. Major scientific institutes miles apart may share single copies of key publications. In this context, the British Council book presentation programme (see Section 8) plays a vital role.

Translations of British works, including fiction and drama approved by the authorities are numerous and on general sale.

There are few if any English-language films on television. With improved dubbing facilities, very few British and American films are now shown in their original version in commercial cinemas.

VOA (Voice of America), BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and other English language programmes, from both West and East, are received over the whole country with varying standards of reception.

2. ENGLISH WITHIN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Since the seventeenth century, educational standards in Bohemia and Moravia have been among the highest in Europe. Slovakia was one of the most backward parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire but has now caught up with the rest of the country. Academic standards are high and school leavers compare favourably with their British counterparts.

Eight years of basic schooling is compulsory. At the age of fourteen about twenty per cent of pupils are enrolled for a further four years in a gymnasium (selective grammar school) and thirty per cent in secondary technical schools. Most of the rest proceed directly to apprenticeship coupled with attendance at a vocational school.

There are five traditional universities (Charles University is the oldest in Central Europe) and four general technical universities. Both Prague and Bratislava technical universities now have over 15,000 students. There are also monotechnic institutions (e.g. agriculture, forestry, transport) with university status. Most pure research is conducted in institutes of the Academies of Science.

There has been some experimental introduction of English in basic schools (approximately 100 schools and 10,000 pupils) mainly to pupils aged ten to fifteen. English is usually begun in the secondary school where Russian and a second foreign language are compulsory. English is the most popular option being studied by some 87,000 pupils. More would do so if the authorities did not need to keep the teachers of French and German occupied. English is taught for two or three periods a week from centrally prescribed, sound but stodgy textbooks. Teachers are required to cover the prescribed course and in two or three periods a week have limited scope for initiative. In general though, standards of teaching are high. Teachers are professionally dedicated and eager to improve their communicative ability and teaching methods. Some

show considerable initiative in devising extra-curricular activities to improve their pupils' English and knowledge of Britain. Motivation varies. It is highest amongst pupils in gymnasia aiming for prestige professions and with family backgrounds where foreign languages are familiar. English is not a compulsory subject in the Secondary Leaving Examination and a pass is not required to enter tertiary education except for students specializing in the subject. Though the universities complain about entrants' standards of English, the general standard of achievement is impressive considering the limited instruction and the almost total lack of exposure to the language outside school.

University students specializing in English do so in the philosophical and pedagogical faculties of the traditional universities where the courses include teacher training. Most graduates in English (there is a heavy preponderance of women) become teachers. Intake into some English departments was reduced between 1982 and 1985 because of a decline in the number of teaching posts available (English has been taught widely only since the 1960s so there is little natural wastage as yet through retirement). Approximately 700 students study in the five philosophical faculty departments of English. English is always combined with another main subject, often physical education or another language. Students often have to take an unpopular language (e.g. Vietnamese) in order to study English. Of the thirty-six hours instruction, only ten are in English (ten hours second main subject, six pedagogy, and the rest politics, sociology, sport, etc).

The English course includes grammar, linguistics, phonology, history of the language, and the study of several periods of English literature. There is relatively little practical language improvement. Students thus learn a lot about the language but not necessarily how to use it with confidence. The British Council-recruited lecturers play an important role in providing intensive language practice. Reading is the most developed skill but few students can cope easily with contemporary novels. Graduating students will have read only selected set texts in original, with much reading in translation.

Graduates of traditional universities who have not studied English often do so voluntarily at the excellent language schools (see below).

At the technical universities, a language other than Russian is compulsory for two hours a week. In Brno Technical University all have to study English. Classes may include beginners as well as those with a good grounding from school level. There is, however, extensive and effective teaching of English for special purposes (ESP) to small highly motivated postgraduate classes. The organization of English teaching in the technical universities varies. Some have an English department with overall responsibility, others have teachers of English within each faculty.

In adult education, English classes are extremely popular and are provided extensively, in both day and evening classes at the twenty-seven language schools in principal towns. Of a total of 59,000 pupils, some 30,000 study English. The Prague Language School, the largest, has over 6,500 students of English and sixty teachers. Classes are attended by a wide variety of people: research workers, who have to cope with foreign texts; university students wanting more practice; specialists preparing for overseas trips; and a large number of people simply interested in acquiring a language which is one window to the outside world. Teachers at the language schools often have a better command of English than those in the main school system: some are very good indeed. Language school teachers are allowed far more initiative in devising their own courses. Language schools have funds to buy books from Britain but these are inadequate. Standards of teaching are remarkably high

considering the few opportunities most teachers have for contact with native speakers. At the Brno Language School, one of the best, no teacher has been nominated by the ministry during the past nine years for one of the thirty-five summer school places in Britain.

Many government ministries and large industrial concerns have language units with one or two teachers. Some of these are extremely good and are allowed far more flexibility than teachers within the educational system. Some firms and ministries arrange for employees with a special need of English to attend up to twenty-four weeks of residential courses spread over two to three years.

The local English by Television programmes were made in the 1970s and show signs of their age. Czechoslovakia is one of the few socialist countries not to take BBC radio or television ELT programmes. There are radio programmes for schools' English but they are not widely enough used to be significant. An exception is in Bratislava where for the past four years the British Council-recruited lecturer has presented programmes which have attracted quite a following.

3. TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

The comparatively few teachers of English in the basic schools' experimental programme are usually graduates of pedagogical institutes (which may be part of a university but do not award full degrees). Their own English is often inadequate.

Secondary and language school teachers are graduates of the philosophical or pedagogical faculties of the traditional-type universities. Their training includes methodology. Their own preferences for in-service training are almost invariably language improvement and background knowledge of Britain. At school they often teach a second subject such as German or physical education. They are not involved in teaching literature and at their pupils' level of proficiency 'reading practice' is a more meaningful term. However, many teachers are personally and keenly interested in literature. Standards of English are variable but often extremely good.

There are no professional organizations for teachers of English at the school level. At the higher and more academic level there are linguistic study circles in Prague, Brno and Plzen.

Regional pedagogic institutes run short (often weekend) in-service courses for English teachers. The resident British lecturers sometimes help with these.

The main in-service programmes are the six two-week courses organized by the ministries of education in collaboration with the British Council and, to a far lesser extent, the American Embassy. The present distribution of courses is: two for secondary school teachers; one for university teachers (non ESP), and translators; one for ESP; one for teachers from language schools; and one for primary school teachers. Approximately fifty teachers attend each course. The British Council provides all the lecturers for the language school, ESP and primary school courses. On the university and secondary-school courses the USA provides about a third of the staff. All directors of studies are appointed by the British Council.

Under the Exchange Programme quotas, fifty places on the British Council and university summer courses in Britain are reserved for Czechs. Of these, thirty-five are teachers of English language and literature (university,

language school and secondary school), ten are final-year undergraduates, and five are people from the cultural field, translators, theatre producers and so forth.

There is intense competition for summer school places, especially those in Britain. Concerning summer schools in Czechoslovakia, British lecturers invariably comment on the eagerness and the industry of the participating teachers. At all levels there is a dearth of contact with native speakers; secondary school teachers may not have talked to a native speaker since leaving university, let alone have visited Britain.

4. MATERIALS SUPPORT

Schools use a centrally prescribed course (Angličtina in the Czech lands; Anglický jazyk in Slovakia), and there are adaptations for language schools etc. Supplementary materials are not readily available. In bookshops, imports from Britain are occasionally available at inflated prices. These are generally reference and supplementary teaching books rather than literary texts. Soviet editions of classical works are occasionally on sale and are cheap.

During 1983-86 the British Council was able to greatly increase its presentation of books and ELT material to the two state libraries, to the university English departments, and to language schools.

The English Section of the Czech State Library in Prague has an open-shelf collection of some 20,000 volumes presented by the British Council. Its book collection compares reasonably well with most small British Council libraries. Newspapers are unfortunately not accepted by the authorities. The British Council is able to present only a small number of periodicals because of the high recurrent costs. There are no restrictions on access to the library; anyone can come and browse. Teachers, students, and anyone recommended by their employer may become registered borrowers. For people outside Prague, postal borrowing is feasible but slow and time-consuming. This library is a life-line to teachers, students, translators and any member of the general public interested in British books.

The English section of the Bratislava 'University' library (the central State Library for learned books and foreign literature) operates on a reader-request ticket system and is therefore less accessible to the general public though invaluable to specialists and students.

In 1983 the British Council began a systematic and substantial book presentation programme to help the philosophical faculties and English departments of technical universities and the main language schools to develop up-to-date collections of, for example, recent fiction, ESP materials and class sets of up-to-date teaching courses.

In 1983 the British Council established a small collection of ELT materials in the Cultural Section for use by our lecturers for in-service courses, and for loan to individual students and teachers. The British Council also has a loan collection of films and videos. Some 200 Czech teachers, students and course organizers visit the Cultural Section each month to consult or borrow ELT books, cassettes, films and videos.

5. EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION IN RELATION TO ENGLISH TEACHING

There are two Ministries of Education - Czech and Slovak. All dealings with universities, schools and other educational institutions have to be through the two Ministry desk officers, currently Dr M. Husek (Czech) and Mrs K. Jurikova (Slovak).

6. DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING OF THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

See above.

7. ENGLISH OUTSIDE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

As stated above many state concerns have their own English teaching programmes. The authorities do not permit private commercial schools. There is no British Council direct teaching of English. There is a small American International School (eighty pupils) for ages four to sixteen. Its enrolment list does not include Czechs; most children are from non-native speaking families (mostly diplomatic). The British Embassy runs a kindergarten for children (aged two to five). The children are mostly non-native speakers.

8. BRITISH SUPPORT FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

Five British Council-recruited lecturers are employed by the Czech and Slovak Ministries of Education, primarily for duties at the Philosophical Faculties of Charles University (Prague), Palacky University (Olomouc), Comenius University (Bratislava), Pavel Josef Safarik University (Presov) and a lecturer in ESP at the Slovak Technical University (Bratislava). All lecturers do a great deal of teaching outside their own institution and are engaged in teacher training, ESP, broadcasting and so forth.

The British Council supplies nineteen lecturers for the six summer schools in English for teachers of English. All directors of studies are British Council-appointed. There are no Czech teaching staff.

As well as the British Council's involvement in the Czech State Library (covered in Section 4), every philosophical faculty library and most English departments and technical universities and language schools now receive regular and substantial book presentations. The British Council also mounts book exhibitions at every summer school and makes book presentations to the participants. Many teachers and course organizers now borrow books, cassettes, films and videos from the Cultural Section collection.

The increased scale of British Council book presentation only scratches the surface of potential demand. But for the first time in many years significant numbers of teachers at key institutions all over the country have some access to substantial numbers of recent British publications.

9. AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

The Americans provide five lecturers for the summer schools where they work with British colleagues. The American Embassy has a well-stocked library in

Prague; visitors are under close surveillance. American book presentations are usually discouraged by the authorities. When permitted, the Americans are extremely generous.

10. OTHER AGENCY SUPPORT

None.

11. COMMERCIAL OPPORTUNITIES

Because of currency exchange problems and political constraints there are few commercial opportunities for British publishers. However in 1985-86 the British Council presented some £25,000 of British books, mostly ELT or related to English studies.

12. CREATIVE WRITING

None.

13. CURRENT RESEARCH

Higher degrees are obtained by thesis after part-time study. University teaching staff need a higher degree to enhance career prospects. Czechoslovakia has a very distinguished tradition of linguistic studies. At present however the only figure of international stature in the field of English linguistics is Dr J. B. Firbas of Brno University, the 1984-85 Longman Visiting Fellow at University College London.

14. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

None.

15. GENERAL STATEMENT

There is an ever-growing demand for English language. Teachers of English at all levels represent an identifiable and important target group.